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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of an informal parental support network on parents' perceptions of child behavior, discipline style, and satisfaction in parenting. The parent support group consisted of 38 parents (mostly mothers) who met regularly and had an opportunity to discuss parenting concerns and compare experiences with their children; however, the primary purpose of these meetings was not explicit provision of parental support. The control group of 37 parents (mostly mothers) did not participate in any formal parent education programs and were not affiliated with one another. It was hypothesized that regular informal supportive contact among parents of children of similar ages would have a positive effect on perception of children's problems, discipline style, and parenting satisfaction. Twice over a 5-week period, participants anonymously completed the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory, the Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale, and the project-created Parenting Self Appraisal Scale and Daily Behavioral Responses. The findings indicated that parents in informal support networks were not significantly different from control parents on most pretest and posttest measures of their perceptions of their children's problems, parent satisfaction, and disciplinary strategies. However, the informal support network members perceived their parenting as more permissive than control group parents on the posttest. Almost all parents were moderately confident in their parenting abilities and all valued firm limit setting. The majority did not believe that parents' admission of mistakes scared or confused children. About 20 percent believed that spanking could increase children's respect for parents. (Author/KDFB)

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An Evaluation of Informal Parent Support Groups

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the effects of informal parental support networks upon the perception of child behavior, styles of discipline, and satisfaction in parenting. The informal groups consisted of parents who met on a regular basis, had an opportunity to discuss parenting concerns and compare experiences with their children; however, the primary purpose of these gatherings was not explicit provision of parental support. The control group was made up of parents who were not participating in any formal parent education programs and who were not affiliated with one another.

It was hypothesized that regular informal supportive contact among parents of similarly aged children would have a positive effect upon perception of children's problems, style of disciplining, and parenting satisfaction. All participants anonymously completed a packet of self-report measures including The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (Robinson & Eyberg, 1980), The Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale (Guidubaldi & Cleminshaw, 1985), Parenting Self Appraisal Scale, and Daily Behavioral Responses.

Introduction

Parenting in today's fast-paced, rapidly changing society can be a confusing and stressful experience. Societal factors, including challenges to the traditional notion of motherhood and fatherhood, have exposed contemporary parents to a variety of child-rearing methods. In response to such changes, many parents are looking to others for reassurance and advice on child rearing. Increasing mobility has reduced access to traditional sources of support for parents, especially the extended family. Reduced regular participation in formal religious organizations has also eliminated one formerly important source of advice and reassurance for many modern-day parents.

Since children respond optimally to different parenting strategies at different ages, parents are engaged in an ongoing experiment with various interventions aimed at helping their child discover satisfying ways to develop competence and confidence that do not infringe upon the rights of others. Like all good experimenters, parents are eager to find ways of assessing the outcome of their efforts, and to evaluate the consequences of their choices.

While feedback from children provides an important indication of parenting success, normal variations in children's moods and their inevitable dissatisfaction with certain reasonable limits makes it problematic to rely solely on children's happiness in measuring parental effectiveness. Similarly, while parents can use

their own sense of happiness as an index of their effectiveness in parenting, expected fluctuations in affect can make self referencing unreliable.

Evaluating one's effectiveness as a parent is generally quite difficult in a social vacuum. Gauging the appropriateness of the rules one establishes, and the means of enforcing boundaries one uses, is impossible without a frame a reference. Since one of the main goals of child rearing is socialization, others' opinions about the acceptability of one's children's behavior provides valuable, relevant information.

While formal parenting effectiveness training programs offer one strategy for filling the social void creating by rising mobility and falling religious service attendance, many parents are reluctant to commit themselves to structured educational programs. Some find the time commitment burdensome; since two-paycheck families are now the norm, most families with children find time to be scarce. Some are uncomfortable focusing directly on parenting issues because they find the process to be threatening. Others are concerned that participating in such programs may imply inadequacy in what most parents describe as their most important role. For these reasons, many parents obtain the advice and support they need through more informal contacts with other parents. Although few studies have investigated the impact of participating in such informal groups, anecdotal evidence attests to their importance in helping to revise parents' perceptions of their children's problems, assisting parents in reflecting on their styles of

disciplining, and enhancing parents' satisfaction.

To assess the benefits of participating in informal supportive gatherings among parents, the Parent Effectiveness Battery was developed and administered to participants and a comparable control group. This battery consists of several brief self report measures, including the Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale, the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory, the Parenting Self Appraisal Scale and a measure of Daily Behavioral Responses. The Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale is a self report measure of satisfaction with a parent's relationship with their child and their satisfaction with their spouse's parenting, especially in disciplining. High scores indicate greater difficulties. Guidubaldi and Cleminshaw (1985) have established both the reliability and validity of this measure.

The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI) (Robinson & Eyberg, 1980) consists of thirty-six items that assess conduct problems of children from two to sixteen years old. It has been found to have high test-retest reliability (.86) and internal consistency (.98). The scale measures whether a listed behavior is a problem for the child and the frequency at which it occurs on a scale of 1 to 7 (Webster-Stratton, 1982).

In addition, the Parenting Self Appraisal Scale and the measure of Daily Behavioral Responses, created by the authors, concentrated on the parents' appraisal and reflection on their own behavior, as well as on their typical responses to everyday conflicts with their children.

It was hypothesized that regular informal supportive contact among parents of similarly aged children would have a positive effect upon perception of children's problems, style of disciplining, and parenting satisfaction.

Methods

Participants

Seventy-five parents, the majority of whom were female, completed the Parent Effectiveness Battery. The control group consisted of thirty-seven parents whose children attended a suburban preschool in Eastern Pennsylvania and who did not previously participate in a formal or informal parent education program. The remaining thirty-eight participants were parents who met regularly with other parents, with repeated opportunities to discuss parenting concerns and to compare parenting experiences.

Apparatus

The Parent Effectiveness Battery consisted of a collection of self-report measures including the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (Eyberg, 1992), the Cleminshaw-Guidabaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale (Guidabaldi & Cleminshaw, 1985), and two measures created by the authors: The Parenting Self Appraisal Scale and Daily Behavior Responses. This scale consisted of 10 likert-style items that measured parents' self-appraisal of their parenting effectiveness and enjoyment. It also contained three open-ended items requesting parents to describe their typical responses to daily situations that frequently present parenting challenges (e.g., strategies used

at bedtime). This qualitative data was coded by trained raters using a four category classification scheme developed previously (Gustafson et al, 1996), which ranged from very permissive to very authoritarian. In addition to these measures, one page of demographic information was included.

Procedure

A pre and post-test were administered anonymously to all participants over a five week period. From the control group, twenty post-tests were returned from the original thirty-seven participants (54%). Eleven of the thirty-one participants from the informal group completed the post-tests (35%). Instructions were included on the first page of the battery; parents were instructed to keep their most challenging child in mind while completing the battery.

Results

Contrary to the hypothesis, parents in informal support networks were not found to be significantly different than the control group on most of the measures of perception of children's problems, perception of parenting, and use of disciplinary strategies, when scores on the post-test measures were compared across the two groups. As a check on pre-treatment equivalence, t-test comparisons of the pretest group scores were conducted. These also showed no significant group differences, suggesting that the failure to obtain outcome difference was not attributable to failure of randomization.

A between-groups t-test comparing global perceived parenting styles, revealed that following participation, the informal support network members perceived their parenting as more permissive than members of the control group ($t=1.99$; $df=25$; $p<.05$).

The majority of parents in the entire sample (96.8%) were moderately confident in their parenting abilities; moreover, all respondents valued firm limit setting. The majority of respondents (80.6%) did not believe that a parent's admitting mistakes scares and confuses children. About a fifth of the entire sample (22.6%) felt that spanking can increase the amount of respect children will have for their parents.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that regular informal supportive contact among parents of similarly aged children would have a positive effect upon perception of children's problems, style of disciplining, and parenting satisfaction. In this study, few significant differences emerged between the experimental and the control groups.

These results may be due to the fact that the informal parenting group and the control group actually experienced relatively similar supportive interactions with other parents, although in different settings. The supportive contacts experienced by the informal group may not have been sufficiently distinctive and exclusive to produce a measurable group difference. This study did not control for such contact among the members of

the control group.

Ceiling effects may also have contributed to the failure to observe group differences. The majority of parents in the entire sample were moderately confident in their parenting abilities; moreover all respondents valued firm limit setting. It was interesting to find that one fifth of the sample reported that spanking can increase the amount of respect children have for their parents.

Problems in Assessing Formal Parenting Programs

The original intent of this study was to investigate the effects of formal parent education programs on parenting styles. However, we encountered the problem of limited participation in many of the formal parenting group programs. Not only was low enrollment in these programs a factor, but unwillingness on the part of the program managers was also a discouraging setback.

Their reluctance to participate may have stemmed from a variety of factors. Even though they were assured that any results would remain anonymous, programs managers may have feared a negative program assessment. Program evaluations are threatening to those whose work is being assessed, and in this study the evaluators lacked the leverage that an external mandate for review often provides outcome assessors. There was no external demand for accountability and the market did not demand a measure of program effectiveness. Consequently, the program managers had little to gain and much to lose from participating.

In addition, almost all of the program managers were themselves parents, and many had previously been participants in the formal parenting training programs they now administered. This may have increased their sense of identification with their clientele. Their reluctance to administer the measures may have been partially the result of their feeling highly protective of their clients' time and privacy. Although the battery used in this study was designed to be brief, many people resist completing questionnaires. Although the battery included many positive items, some respondents may find it embarrassing and intrusive to be asked to describe their children's behavior problems. Since most of the formal parenting programs approached were struggling to sustain adequate enrollment, the managers may have been reluctant to administer any questionnaires that any prospective participants might have found in any way offensive, leading to extreme conservatism. The irony here is that without confirmed results, formal parenting programs are unlikely to ever be successful in marketing their services to the public!

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